

Iglesia peregrina, iglesia de migrantes

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« Somos un pueblo que camina, que marcha por el mundo buscando otra ciudad; somos errantes peregrinos en busca de un destino, destino de unidad, siempre seremos caminantes, pues sólo caminando podremos alcanzar otra ciudad que no se acaba, sin penas ni tristezas, ciudad de eternidad.». Emilio Vicente Mateu

This well-known song, by Emilio Vicente Mateu, beautifully reminds us of what scripture emphasizes continually, *we are all migrants on this earth*. The constitutions of Vatican II introduced the powerfully rich image of the Church as the pilgrim “People of God,” always on the move. Yes, ultimately, this journey will lead us to that final destination – the heavenly Jerusalem where, according to the Apostle John, people of all races and nations will sing in unison a song of praise, enjoying full communion with God and with each other. But, until that apocalyptic vision is realized, our mission is lived now – in this world with all its beauty and all its brokenness. *Gaudium et Spes* clearly calls us to this identity and mission:

“Los cristianos, en marcha hacia la ciudad celeste, deben buscar y gustar las cosas de arriba, lo cual en nada disminuye, antes por el contrario, aumenta, la importancia de la misión que les incumbe de trabajar con todos los hombres en la edificación de un mundo más humano (57).”

We can truly say then, to be Christians is to be migrants on a mission! When on a journey, progress is made only if we are not burdened down with attachments – not only with material belongings – but more importantly, we are called to detach from false identities. As we continue our dialogue this afternoon on migration, I want to focus on how false identities that arise from an exaggerated nationalism and economic privilege distort our view of ourselves and of our brothers and sisters who have been displaced by economic and political systems of greed and exclusion that fuel compulsory, global migration. I will also outline some of the ways we

can advance a truly Catholic view and agenda – rooted in our core identity as a Pilgrim Church, a Church of Migrants.

Some Root Causes of Migration:

The United Nations reports that over 68 million people have been displaced around the world by war, political unrest, human trafficking, and natural disasters; but mostly it is the push and pull effects of economic forces that are at root of today's massive global migration. On our continent, the U.N. estimates that over 28 million Latin American and Caribbean people live outside the countries where they were born, and the "number one" destination is the United States of America. Yet despite the fact that global and continental migration is primarily fueled by economic forces, governments consistently refuse to address this issue with any substance in negotiating treaties and trade agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and now the proposed United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) that the Trump Administration is pressuring the U.S. Congress to enact.

These pacts - for the most part - only open the doors for the unrestricted movement of capital, materials, and products beyond national borders by multinational corporations. These entities yield more political and economic power than most nation states in Latin America. They operate above the laws of the state, weakening not only its political power but eventually eroding all aspects of its civil society. They have no commitment to the countries they operate in apart from their "bottom line." These free trade agreements, corporate tax breaks, and one-sided policies have generated great wealth for a fourth of the world's population but great misery for the other three-fourths of the world's population. For every person who benefits from the present economic and political order, thousands upon thousands are forced to choose between

poverty in their homelands or the possibility of a better life for themselves and their families elsewhere. This is the new colonialism the Church condemns because it continues to rob developing countries of not only their natural resources but also their brightest and most determined citizens.¹

The new colonialism imposes legally binding pacts among powerless nations to ensure the free movement of capital and products and at the same time restricting the movement of laborers from these impoverished countries. *We must be very clear as a Pilgrim Church* - when money and things have more rights than human beings, we must emphatically say, “This is not Catholic!” This economic injustice is at the root cause of poverty, a systemic violence that threatens the very core of human identity, as co-creators with God. When people are denied their fundamental right to dignity and meaningful employment, despair sets in...festers and becomes violence. Violence always begets more violence and continues to escalate despair as civil society severely weakens. Eventually, the “rule of law” gives way to corruption and organized crime. Citizens are left unprotected and without recourse to justice.

This is the lawlessness that is so rampant throughout Latin America, triggering compulsory mass migrations. Families are not migrating only for economic reasons; rather, they live in terror of kidnapping, rape, extortion, and random shootings. The new dimension of migration in our day is fear. It is all pervasive. I have listened to these brothers and sisters, and their stories are pure horror. Instead of listening to these stories, and trying to understand the root causes of this mass flight from terror, many who are not living this reality, find it easy to blame migrants for the humanitarian crisis we are presently experiencing at the US/Mexico border. The hateful speech fans the flame of fear and causes good people – including many Catholics – to see

¹ *Caritatis in Veritate* 32-33.

migrants as marauding caravans of invaders rather than our brothers and sisters desperately seeking asylum. This blindness leads to terrible public policy.

For example, the Trump administration continues to exasperate the humanitarian crises at the border with fake news and punitive policies. The zero tolerance policy enacted last summer led to families caught entering the country irregularly being subjected to criminal prosecution and having their children – including infants and toddlers – taken away from them as a result. The practice of separating families is unlawful interference in family life, a serious violation of human rights, and – according to our Catholic moral teaching – a serious social sin. The use of detention facilities and cages for children and families as a deterrent also runs counter to human rights standards and principles.

We must be united as a Pilgrim Church in calling on the Trump administration to adopt non-custodial alternatives that allow children to remain with their families. The US says the policy aims to stem a surge in the number of poor families, mostly from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, entering the country. But no one in the administration is asking the systemic questions, “Why are they coming?” and “How are we part of the reasons they are coming?” Without addressing the root causes, thousands will continue to make the dangerous trek to cross the US Mexico border each week. They will continue to turn themselves in and ask for asylum. This is their fundamental human right, and it is the law of the United States.

A Catholic Response to Compulsory Migration:

The Catholic Church has a long tradition of upholding the fundamental rights to meaningful labor, respect human dignity, and freedom to migrate. Workers have the right to fair wages and to organize unions. In general, the Church upholds the rights of individuals to hold

private property and to exercise economic initiative. The Church also affirms the right of Nations to establish and maintain their borders. These rights however are not without equally important individual and collective responsibilities; they must be balanced with a proper understanding of principles related to justice, the common good, subsidiarity, and the careful stewardship of God's creation. Economic systems exist to serve people, not the other way around. Displaced and undocumented migrants are essential for the economic status quo, but they are not accorded justice and protection under the law. They are invisible commodities who make life comfortable for those who benefit from their cheap labor. This is particularly true for so many undocumented Hispanics employed as blue collar and service industry workers. Just labors laws and the right to unionize are essential for these workers. Tragically migration and labor policies are a concrete reminder that the intrinsic evil of racism still persists in the social fabric of the United States and that of the Latin American countries where the majority of migrant workers originate.

The U.S. Catholic Bishops have sought to courageously uphold the basic human rights of migrants and call on Catholics to not only welcome fellow migrants to alleviate their suffering, but also the Bishops call on U.S. Catholics to work for systemic change, especially comprehensive immigration reform. The Bishops have offered practical policy solutions to several administrations proposing compelling moral arguments to bring the estimated 12 million undocumented migrants in the United States out of the shadows. Hispanic and non-Hispanic Bishops together are lobbying Congress to fix our broken immigration system and denounce the rising tide of dehumanizing rhetoric that demonizes migrants as invaders that must be stopped by a wall. *But, as we can clearly see at our borders, there is no wall high enough to deter the dreams of those seeking a better life or desperately seeking safety for their children!*

A Catholic, systematic response must reject false choices. We can protect our borders and uphold human dignity. Comprehensive immigration reform would include an earned path to citizenship, appropriate worker protections, and policies that keep families from being separated. If we hope to move beyond simplistic solutions and the hateful rhetoric that define our polarized immigration debate, we need deeper conversations and bold Lay leadership in both Church and society. We must continue to lift our voices and advocate for those whose voices are silenced. We have an opportunity, perhaps sooner than we thought possible, to be instrumental in enacting laws that can begin to reform the racist and broken immigration systems on both sides of the border. As bridge-builders, an even more important role will be to find ways to reframe the heated discourse on immigration reform in our countries: from debate to dialogue; from problem to opportunity; from symptoms to causes; and from unilateral action to innovative, global collaboration – especially on our continent, as one Church in America.

Dimensions of a Catholic Response:

What does a Catholic immigration wish list look like? On what basis would Catholics advance it? Our response is based on Catholic social teaching, which, in turn, is based on Scripture. Allow me to begin with the U.S. and Mexican bishops' pastoral statement, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, released in 2003, which highlights principles for immigration reform based on Catholic social teaching. From this statement and other Catholic sources, including the teachings of Pope Francis, a robust immigration agenda emerges which would reform this system in a fair and humane way.

A path to citizenship for the undocumented in the United States. Of course, this should be the central tenet of any immigration reform, as it would bring a large, hidden population out of the shadows. As the U.S. bishops have pointed out, a path to citizenship would keep families together, enable immigrants to fully integrate into society, and be consistent with national security. This path to citizenship should be fair and achievable within a reasonable time-period. As these broad-based efforts may take time, Congress must move expeditiously to provide legal status to DACA and Temporary Protected Status recipients.

Reform of the legal immigration system. Contrary to the current Administration's view, the Catholic approach to improving the legal immigration system would be to increase its efficiencies and as well as additional legal avenues for low-skilled workers to migrate legally -- not through a dangerous trek in the desert. The first goal would be the elimination of wait times for family reunification permanent visas (green cards), which in some cases can take decades. Removing the cap on green cards for immediate family members of legal permanent residents and placing them in the U.S. citizen category -- which has no cap and about a six-month waiting time -- would be a good start. It would also open up slots for other family categories, decreasing wait times overall.

On the labor side, there are only 5,000 green cards in the current system for low-skilled workers, despite the demand for immigrant workers in the service, construction, and agriculture industries. These numbers must be increased, and, as *Strangers No Longer* advocates, a visa program that protects the rights of immigrant workers and gives them a chance to earn permanent residency would help fill that void. Presently, the needs of the low-skill labor market

generally are being met by undocumented workers, who are sadly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

The current Administration's policies eliminate family categories and replace part of the employment-based system with a point-system skewed toward wealthy and highly-skilled immigrants. With the nation's workforce aging, baby boomers retiring, and population replacement level at an all-time low, the merit-based approach will leave the U.S. economy with severe worker shortages in the decades ahead. The U.S. economy, the largest in the world, requires workers of all skill levels, not just the well-educated. A merit system could complement the current system, but should not *replace* it.

Strengthen the U.S. asylum system. We have seen recent attempts to deny asylum-seekers the opportunity to present their claims in the United States. A recent proclamation by the president, which has since been struck down by a U.S. court, would force asylum-seekers to wait in line at ports-of-entry, which would take months. Another abuse of current law keeps asylum seekers in Mexico until their hearings, which in some cases could take years. Delaying justice is denying it. Instead of reducing protection for asylum-seekers, the Catholic position would ensure that all asylum-seekers are granted due process protections consistent with international law. This will require more resources for immigration courts, which currently have large backlogs, along with providing legal representation for asylum-seekers, especially children. This would make the court system more efficient and ensure that asylum-seekers are given their day in court. The use of expedited removal should be extremely limited, except for those who legitimately threaten national security.

Immigration Enforcement. Catholic teaching recognizes the right of sovereign nations to control their border and enforce the law. From the perspective of Catholic teaching, the

question is **how** such enforcement is conducted. The Catholic Church is not against the enforcement of the law, properly formed, as long as it is applied fairly and humanely. Human rights and dignity should be paramount in the enforcement of immigration law, a principle that is often discarded by current immigration policies and their implementation. Due process protections, the elimination of unnecessary detention, and access to legal counsel are essential elements of a just system. The Catholic position is, first, to bring those who are not a threat out of the shadows to register with the government -- ensure they are not a threat -- and place them on a path to citizenship. By making them known to the government, law enforcement could then focus on true criminal threats.

Border Security and the need to address root causes of flight. The president's focus on the construction of a several billion dollar wall across the 2,000-mile southern border continues to focus attention on militarizing the border. A study from the Center for Migration Studies found that visa overstays exceed the number of border apprehensions. Thus, as many have argued, a border wall is both unnecessary and very expensive. A wall also would not stop migrants from trying to enter the country to find a better life, as the factors driving them to leave their home countries remain stronger than any barriers erected to stop them. As such, the church's response to a border wall, simply put, always has been to address the **push factors** driving people to take dangerous journeys to reach the United States. By our addressing endemic poverty and violence in the sending countries, people could and would remain at home to support their families in peace and security. The Church's answer to a border wall is sustainable economic development in developing countries. As the Mexican economy has improved, for example, the number of workers from Mexico crossing the border, according to a CMS study, has decreased by 11 percent over the past five years.

The task for Catholic advocates, especially Lay Leaders in Church and Society, is to make their voices heard in a way that creates political leverage for an agreement that provides a fair path to citizenship for the undocumented and reforms other aspects of our immigration system in a humane manner. This, of course, will not be easy, but we must remain focused on this vision. The Catholic community should not shirk from the principles included in *Strangers No Longer*, which outline just and humane reforms to the system, regardless of the political climate.

As a Pilgrim Church, we must live our faith as migrants and in solidarity with actual migrants, who are only trying to survive and to share their gifts with us. We must also speak out against all forms of xenophobia and discrimination, both in the public square and within our Church. As Catholics, we cannot recoil from the fear being peddled by some in the political world and from misguided Catholics who have forgotten their core identity as pilgrims in this world. Everyone has God-given dignity which must be honored. Every person is created in the image and likeness of God! The Lord calls upon us to stand by our brothers and sisters and to act on their behalf, to “welcome the stranger” and “do unto others as we would want them to do to us.” Let us apply the gospel message faithfully and boldly to the human problem of immigration! Let us continue to be, “Un Pueblo que camina...edificando un mundo más humano!”